儿子第一次握镰刀

国庆回村，表哥家的稻正好开镰。我跟儿子说，走，下田看看去。他在城里只会背锄禾日当午，背了三年，米粒长在哪根秆上都不知道。

表哥递给他一把小镰刀，是他这个头专用的，刃不长。表哥教他左手拢稻秆，右手下刀，刀口斜着往上走。儿子第一把拢得太少，两三根，割得磕磕绊绊。第二把拢多了，镰刀吃不住，稻秆倒了一片，他自己也坐在地里。我在田埂上没笑，表哥也没笑，表哥伸手把他拎起来，说再来。第三把起他就顺了，虽然割出来的稻子铺得歪歪扭扭，像一排没站齐的兵。他割了半垄就直腰，学着大人的样子用胳膊肘蹭鼻子上的汗，那个动作学得惟妙惟肖，我忍住了笑。

割完的田轮到他拾谷穗。掉在地上的稻穗，一穗一穗捡起来归堆。他起先捡得随意，抓一把塞兜里。表哥说不行，掉一穗是一穗，种稻的人见不得田里留穗。他就认真起来，低着头沿着割过的垄一穗一穗数着捡，半垄下来捡了小半抱，兜里那几穗又补进堆里。直起腰时他说了句，原来米真的是一穗一穗来的。

歇晌时儿子问表哥，这一亩田能打多少米。表哥掐着指头算，说好的年成一千二，今年雨水匀，能有一千一。儿子掰着手指换算，说一碗饭二两米，这一亩够我们家吃大半年。表哥说账不是这么算的，还要留种子、交租、喂鸡鸭，七折八扣，落进碗里的没几成。儿子不信，表哥抓了把谷在掌心搓开，摊给他看，瘪的、断的、壳里空的，都在那一把里。

歇晌时表哥从地头井里打上水来，用吊桶，摇得吱呀响。井水拔凉，灌进搪瓷缸，白汽在缸壁上凝成水珠。儿子捧过缸子咕咚咕咚灌了半缸，抹嘴说比家里冰箱里的凉水好喝。表哥乐了，让他再喝一缸。他自己蹲在井台边，就着桶沿喝，喉结一动一动。

回程的路上儿子睡着了，指甲缝里还嵌着泥。我开着车想，割稻、拾穗、喝井水，这些事我小时候天天做，后来忘了，如今要带着儿子回一趟乡下才能重新记起来。田还是那片田，镰刀换了几代，握镰刀的手也换了几代。他长大未必记得这一天的太阳，但他的手握过镰刀，他的嘴喝过刚打上来的井水，这就够了。

The First Time My Son Held a Sickle

During the National Day holiday I drove back to the village, and the family of my cousin was just beginning to reap their rice. I said to my son, come on, let us go down to the field and watch. In the city he has only ever recited the old poem about hoeing weeding at noon, recited it for three years, and still does not know which stalk a grain of rice grows on.

My cousin handed him a small sickle, the size made for a boy his height, with a short blade. Cousin taught him to gather the rice stalks with his left hand, cut with his right, and let the blade bite upward at a slant. His first grab held only two or three stalks, and he sawed them off clumsily. The second grab held too many; the sickle could not bite through, the stalks fell in a heap, and he sat down in the

middle of the field himself. I did not laugh from the field ridge, and neither did cousin. Cousin reached down, hauled him up, and said, try again. From the third grab on he found the rhythm, though the cut rice lay in a crooked row, like soldiers who failed to stand in line. After half a ridge he straightened up and wiped the sweat off his nose with his elbow, the way adults do, mimicked so perfectly that I had to bite back a laugh.

After the reaping was done it was his turn to glean. The rice ears that had fallen on the ground, pick them up one by one and gather them into a pile. At first he gleaned carelessly, grabbing handfuls into his pocket. Cousin said no, one fallen ear counts as one ear, and no rice farmer can bear to leave ears in the field. So he got serious, head down, counting and picking along the cut rows, and after half a ridge he held a small armful, then added the few ears in his pocket to the pile. Straightening up, he said one sentence: so rice really does come ear by ear.

At the break my son asked cousin how many jin of rice one mu of this field can yield. Cousin counted on his fingers and said a good year gives twelve hundred jin, and this year the rain was even, so maybe eleven hundred. My son counted on his fingers to convert it: one bowl of rice takes two liang of grain, so this one mu could feed our family for most of half a year. Cousin said the math does not work that way. You must keep seed, pay the fees, feed the chickens and ducks, and after seven discounts and eight deductions, only a few bowls of rice actually reach the table. My son did not believe it, so cousin grabbed a handful of grain, rubbed the husks open in his palm, and spread it out for him to see: the shriveled ones, the broken ones, the ones hollow inside the shell, all in that one handful.

At the midday break cousin pumped water up from the well at the edge of the field with a bucket on a windlass, the crank creaking away. The well water was ice-cold; poured into an enamel mug, it left beads of condensation on the white surface. My son took the mug and gulped down half of it, then wiped his mouth and said it tasted better than the cold water from our refrigerator at home. Cousin laughed and told him to drink another mug. He himself squatted by the well curb, drinking straight from the rim of the bucket, his throat working up and down.

On the way home my son fell asleep, mud still wedged under his fingernails. Driving, I thought: reaping, gleaning, drinking well water, I did these things every day as a child, then forgot them, and now I have to bring my son back to the countryside once to remember them again. The field is still that field; the sickles have changed through a few generations, and the hands gripping them have changed too. He may not remember the sun of this day when he grows up, but his hand has held a sickle, and his mouth has drunk water just pumped from the well. That is enough.